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INFO ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE

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SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

AMEMBASSY ASTANA PASS TO AMCONSUL ALMATY

AMEMBASSY HELSINKI PASS TO AMCONSUL ST PETERSBURG

AMEMBASSY MOSCOW PASS TO AMCONSUL VLADIVOSTOK

AMEMBASSY MOSCOW PASS TO AMCONSUL YEKATERINBURG

AMEMBASSY BELGRADE PASS TO AMEMBASSY PODGORICA

AMEMBASSY ATHENS PASS TO AMCONSUL THESSALONIKI

E.O. 12958: DECL: 2020/02/04

TAGS: PREL PHUM ELAB PGOV UZ

SUBJECT: Uzbekistan: Ambassador Meets with Bible Society Representative

REF: 10 TASHKENT 49

CLASSIFIED BY: Holly Lindquist Thomas, P/E Officer, Tashkent; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

¶1. (U) Ambassador Norland met with Bible Society of Uzbekistan (BSU) Chairman Sergei Mitin on February 1 to discuss recent difficulties the BSU has faced in carrying out its activities. (See reftel.)

¶2. (SBU) The BSU has three ongoing issues: a shipment of Uzbek-, Karakalpak- and Russian-language Bibles, impounded by Uzbek customs officials since May 2008; a recent request to import a new shipment of Russian-language materials; and a recent request to be allowed to publish the book of Isaiah in the Uzbek language. Mitin requested no specific Embassy action at this time on these issues, but the Ambassador and he discussed possible options should communications break down all together with the Religious Affairs Committee (RAC).

¶3. (C) Mitin believes that the problems arising in the last few years can be attributed at least in part to Acting Chairman of the Religious Affairs Committee Ortig Yusupov, who seems disinclined to help the various minority religious groups. (Note: Yusupov remains the "acting" chairman, although he has held the position for nearly four years.) The Ambassador and Mitin agreed that it would be helpful to identify someone else within the presidential apparatus and perhaps someone in the newly assembled parliament as new interlocutors on religious freedom issues. Ambassador Norland assured Mitin that we will continue to press to include religious freedom in discussions during the annual bilateral consultation process, noting that so far it has been a rocky road.

¶4. (C) Mitin agreed that the Russian Embassy and the Russian Orthodox Church should share an interest in pressing the GOU to allow the importation of Bibles. However, Mitin observed, neither seemed disposed to assist smaller protestant groups such as his (Mitin is a Baptist). He welcomed the Ambassador's offer to raise

this issue with Russian counterparts.

15. (C) Comment: This is not the first time we have heard complaints that Chairman Yusupov has shown little support to religious communities in Uzbekistan, and with his "Acting" title still in place, it seems safe to say his hands are tied by the security services. (Note: Yusupov will take part in an Embassy-sponsored IV program from March 8 - 23. It will be interesting to see whether exposure to American-style religious freedom will change his approach to minority religious groups in the future.) Religious issues are fraught in Uzbekistan, but our hope is that someone else from the GOU will emerge as a more constructive interlocutor, as was the case last year before State Advisor on Religious Affairs Bahrom Abduhalimov was removed from his job in the Apparat. End comment.

NORLAND